Sunday, January 27, 1980
JONAH: DISAPPOINTED WITH SUCCESS
Jonah 1:1-4,17, 2:10, 3:1-5, 4:1-4

Most of the time most of us are delighted when we are successful in some endeavor but not always. There are times when like Jonah in the Old Testament, we are disappointed with success or even downright angry. We are even more upset when we do something which we did not want to do in the first place and then find that we were successful. That's exactly what happened to Jonah.

Jonah was a prophet and had received a command from God to go to the city of Nineveh and preach to the people of that city in order to get them to repent of their evil ways. It was a job that Jonah didn't want to do. So, Jonah tried to run away from that assignment.

1. And that's the first main point of the story of Jonah--he tried to flee from God and God's command; he tried to run away from what he knew he must do. He went to the port city of Joppa, found a ship that was going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and sailed in the opposite direction of what God wanted him to do.

All of us try at one time or another to run away from an assignment which we know we should do, but which we do not want to do. And we try to escape for various reasons. In Jonah's case, he didn't try to get out of going to Nineveh, because of lack of dedication or some sense of fear and inadequacy to do the job. Many have been the men and women who, upon sensing the will of God have cried "I can't handle it. Send someone else. The job is too big for me. I don't have the necessary skill. Send someone else." Thus, Moses complained that he wasn't a good enough speaker, so God had better find someone else. Elijah became depressed and thought he was inadequate for the task.

But Jonah was different. He wasn't afraid of the Ninevites. He knew he had the skill for the task. The book of Jonah everywhere shows him to be a man of inner control and strength, a man of devotion to God, totally unafraid of what people or the elements could do to him.

So brave was Jonah, that once on-board ship to Tarshish, and the ship was in a tremendous storm, that he was able to sleep through it below deck. And when the captain of the ship awakened him and Jonah perceived that he and his own actions might be the cause of the danger and possible death to the ship's crew, he volunteered to sacrifice himself to make up for whatever distress he might otherwise cause.

Most people running from God are far more willing that others should suffer for their mistakes than they themselves. Not so with Jonah! He was a believer, a follower of God, up to a point. He said to the captain of the ship, "Take me up and throw me into the sea, and then perhaps the storm vi1ill be over."

But Jonah could only run from God's will for so long. Even being thrown overboard in a storm did not help him escape from God's appointed task. According to the story, the Lord designated a giant fish to swallow up Jonah and after three days in the belly of the fish, the fish vomited out Jonah right at the edge of the city of Nineveh, the very place he was trying to avoid.

And God again said to Jonah, “Arise, go to Nineveh and preach the good news of the love and mercy of God.” Jonah still was reluctant, but he went anyway.

2. And this brings us to the second main point of the story — the reason that Jonah didn’t want to preach to the people of Nineveh, the reason he was trying to run from God’s assignment. We noted before that he did not resist because of fear, or because he didn’t have the skill--Jonah resisted because he didn’t think the job should be done in the first place. To put it bluntly, Jonah thought God was foolish in wanting anyone to waste his or her time on the people of Nineveh.

Jonah was sure that the people of Nineveh didn’t deserve to hear of God’s love and mercy. They weren’t worth it. They weren’t his kind of people. God loved and cared for the Hebrews, Jonah’s own people, and that was enough.

So, Jonah was not rebelling against the difficulty of the task which God had given him, but against the foolishness of a God who would want such a thing done! Maybe Jonah is more like most of us who are in the church today than we like to admit. He had decided like many of us, that he knew more of what God ought to do and think than God himself.

Evidently Jonah believed that there are people in this world, in this. case the Ninevites, who don’t deserve to be included in God’s love. He had already. written off the people of Nineveh. Jonah was not a crazy person who believed that two and two make five; like most of us he knew that two plus two make four, but oh how he hated it.

Why speak of good and holy things to the scum of the earth who have shown only viciousness and inhumanity toward others?

Don’t we also find ourselves thinking that God is foolish for loving the down and out, those on welfare, the poor, the homosexuals, the meek, the unrighteous, the losers, those in prison? Isn’t that exactly what the critics of Jesus thought? They were angry because he spent so much time with the sinners, the prostitutes and others like them. He should leave them to their misguided ways, and spend more time with the good people, with people like us.

Some people just don’t deserve to be recipients of God’s love. That was Jonah’s point of view. Remember not too many years ago when one of the biggest controversies in the church was over the fact that the church was sending ministers to speak of the love of God to those who had fled this country to Canada and other places in order to avoid the draft? People in the churches like Jonah said, “That’s foolish. They don’t deserve to be ministered to.” Good church people have said the same thing about providing ministries to people in prison, to those on skid row, to drug addicts, and others. Why would God be foolish enough to want to have His word spoken to them?

Jonathan Swift over 200 years ago wrote, “We have enough religion to make us hate but not enough to make us love one another.”

Wasn’t it Jonah living all over again in the Spanish Inquisition as men and women were put to death for disagreeing over the announced opinions of God by the church? Wasn’t it the Jonah kind of thinking again in Salem, Massachusetts burning witches at the stake and thinking that society need never tolerate those who thought differently or acted differently — and that God’s love and mercy didn’t extend to them?

It's a constant temptation for Christians, to be like Jonah and come to believe that there are those who do not deserve to know of God's love. There are those who deserve no better than they have, those who have made their own quicksand and ought to sink into it. There are those Ninevites, we say, to whom you don't need to go with a message of judgment, much less a message of God's love for them.

Thank God for people like Mother Teresa in India, who through her ministry extends the love of God to those who need it most. Instead of trying to avoid the Ninevites, she actively seeks them out.

A man was staying overnight in the home of a Yugoslav pastor and his wife and three boys. Two of the boys were handsome, strong young men. They were going to the University and showing high promise. The third boy, twenty years old was over in the corner of the room, playing with his toys. The visitor asked if he might take a picture of the family, thinking of the parents and the two normal boys. But the father said to him, "Wait a moment until I get him ready." Then the picture was taken with the retarded boy in the center. The visitor said later, "I learned something from that father about what it means to belong to a family. No child was missing from that picture, not one."

Jonah had to learn the lesson that all human beings belong to God's family, no matter who they are or what their condition. No one of us is missing from that picture, not one.

God's family includes those who have done us harm, those who live by other gods, the Ninevites. Not one is missing when God has pictures taken of his family, not the rapist, not the murderer, not the Russian, or the Moslem, or the Iranians, or the Cambodians, or anyone.

But if you don't think there are many Jonahs around today and among us Christians, ask an innocent young woman who after a moment of overriding passion becomes the mother of an illegitimate child. She will tell you that society is slow to forgive. Go to any prison and ask the inmates, they will tell you that society is slow to forgive. They will also tell you that most people, like Jonah, think it's foolish to waste their time visiting them in prison or being concerned about them. The Ninevites are still among us and so are the Jonahs.

3. And there's a third point to this story of Jonah which applies to us. (1) Not only did Jonah try to flee from God's assignment and (2) Not only did Jonah think God was foolish, but (3) when Jonah finally obeyed God and preached to the Ninevites that they should repent and accept God's love, he was successful beyond all his dreams. They did repent, from the King on down and God forgave them, but Jonah was disappointed with his success and angry and depressed

Can you imagine? Disappointed with success? There is joy in heaven. God is delighted, but Jonah is angry. As the book of Jonah closes, we find him sitting outside the city wall, disappointed, upset, and discouraged because he has succeeded in his mission. He is filled with grievances.

Most of us have our gardens of grievances which we cultivate. Think of some of the ways in which we are sometimes disappointed with success. We complain to someone about his or her mistakes or lack of attention, and the person surprises us and says, "You're right, I have failed, but I'm going to change my ways and do better," and he or she does just that. But now we have nothing left to complain about, so we have to cultivate another garden of grievances. We're disappointed with our success.

A few years back, some of the people in the anti-Vietnam war movement were most critical of President Lyndon Johnson and his handling of the war. Then Mr. Johnson announced that he was not going to seek re-election and some of his critics were upset because they were successful. Now they had to find another enemy to oppose.

Some of us are most disappointed with success when someone has severely wronged us and all we want to do is to see that person punished. But then maybe the one who has wronged us says — “please forgive me for what I’ve done to you. Like the people of Nineveh, the person repents. But sometimes we find it difficult to be forgiving — we want to go on hating and nursing our wounds. Thus, God asked Jonah,” Do you do well to be angry and not forgiving? “God asks the same question each day of you and me. Amen.